



Understanding and supporting Children and Young people with Emotionally Based School Refusal

What is School Refusal?

School phobia is common childhood behaviour problem that refers to a child's refusal to attend school.

Often accompanied by:

- Irrational fears
- Physical complaints
- Temper tantrums
- Panic or anxiety related school attendance.

It is essential that school phobia is not confused with Truancy

(No Panic, 2019)

School Refusal has been referenced as "the reaction of children who experience severe anxiety and distress in relation to attending school, often resulting in prolonged absences"

(Notfineinschool, 2017)

Statistics

School refusal can be seen to:

- Affects **2-5%** of children and young people during their education (Kawsar et al., 2021)
- Equally prevalent between boys and girls
- Occurs at times of school transition i.e. 5 years old when getting into primary school, 11 years olds when transitioning into secondary school and 14-15 year old when they are engaging in GCSEs (Taylor, 2017)



- Severe cases suffer with depression, self-harm and sometimes attempt suicide. (Notfineinschool, 2017)
- School refusal is different from Truancy and can be referred to as Emotional Distress. (NoPanic, 2019)
- No socioeconomic differences are noted (Kawsar et al, 2021)

It important to note:

Not all anxious children may display obvious characteristics. Often, we see children and young people masking their symptoms:

- Fear of being told off
- Containing their feelings of anxiety
- Can display signs of aggression
- Can be seen to be trying to control the situation

Within the school environment, child may hide or avoid their emotions but when they return home, they feel safe and are able to release their emotions. This can lead to families having to experiencing high levels of stress.

Blending: copying others to try and blend in but not really understanding the context or expectations.

Masking: feeling anxious but hiding inner-feelings and acting as if you are ok to protect yourself

(Notfineinschool, 2017)

Signs/Symptoms

Behaviours	Emotions/ Feelings	Physical symptoms
Running away from school	Irritable/snappy	Headaches
Frequent calls home	Sadness	Stomach aches
Avoidance	Anger	Increased heart rate
Difficulty leaving the home	Anxious	Dizziness
Lack of willingness to complete work	Tearfulness	Fatigue
Refusal to engage in social activities	Dysregulation	Muscle pain/tension

(YoungMinds, 2021)

Triggers

The list of possible reasons for why children and young people may engage in school refusal is not extensive. However, research shows that the list below has been reasons for why children and young people may engage in school refusing.

- School pressure
- Tests/exams
- Bullying
- Friendship difficulties
- Social anxiety
- Learning difficulties
- Home difficulties
- Mobility difficulties



- Classroom disruption
- Emotional development delay
- Changes to routine/staffing
- Trauma



Autism and Anxiety

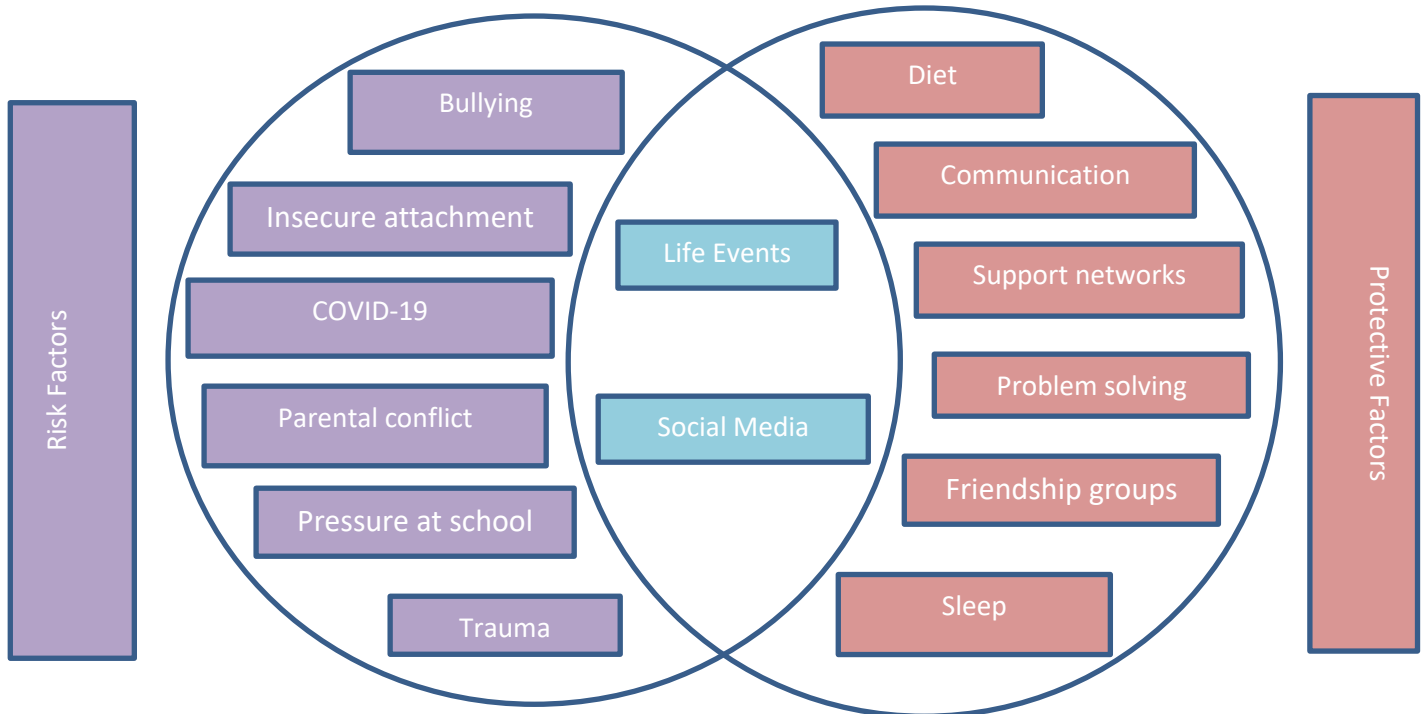
Parents often report that diagnosed or suspected Special Educational Needs are often the underlying cause of severe anxiety that leads to school refusal. As an example, Autistic Spectrum Disorders (ASD) are often linked to school attendance difficulties.

Preece and Howley observe: 'given the nature of ASD and social anxiety, it is perhaps not surprising that some individuals are absent from school for extended periods and thus become disengaged from formal education.' (2018:3). Munkhaugen, et al (2017) confirm this by explaining that cases of school refusal behaviour are significantly higher in children with ASD than in typically developing students.

PREECE & HOWLEY (2018) found that factors contributing to positive outcomes for young people with ASD and high anxiety when they re-engaged with formal education were

- the development of an appropriate learning environment
- a focus on the individual
- an eclectic approach
- consistency
- effective communication
- effective collaboration.

Notfineinschool (2022)



Video: [School Anxiety & Refusal | Parents Guide To Support | YoungMinds](#)

What can you do to help?

Helping your child with social anxiety

These could be things at school or home that would help them to feel less worried. We include some strategies in the section below. Visit the GP if there may be an underlying physical or mental health issue that needs support.

This can help stop problems building up. Speak to the class teacher, tutor, pastoral team, or Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCO).

Identify activities that help them express and manage their anxiety. This could be spending time with particular friends, listening to music, reading, playing sport, drawing, cooking or watching a favourite film.

Planning everything from getting up and dressed, having breakfast and leaving the house to arriving at school can help create a sense of security and reduce stress.



Prepare the night before, for instance checking timetable, packing bags and laying out clothes.

Your child can use a notebook to jot down worries, which can stop them from becoming overwhelming. Carrying something from home – such as a key ring or photo – may also reduce anxiety.

Youngminds (2022)

Action plan: Develop an action plan to support your young person's return to school.

- Questioning/ Communication
- Problem solving
- Anxiety ladder
- Anxiety Management Strategies
 - o Breathing exercises
 - o Progressive Muscle Relaxation
 - o Visualization/ Distraction
- Liaise with school and other relevant parties

Action plan – Questioning/ Communication

Questions to consider:

- What is making the young person nervous/ anxious/ frightened?
- What do they think is going to happen if they go to school?

Acknowledge the young person difficulties

Be curious with your responses to your young person

Try not to overload your young person with a lot of questions at one time

Make suggestions of what might help

(Creswell et al, 2019)

Don't shout, tell them off or physically force them to go to school. This is likely to increase the worry

(YoungMinds, 2021)

Action Plan – Problem solving

Step 1: Identify the problem – be as specific as possible

Step 2: Brainstorm every possible solution – every solution is valid there are no “silly” solutions

Step 3: Consider the positive and negatives of each solution

Step 4: Rate each solution – 0 not the best solution, 10 the best solution

Step 5: Make an action plan – how, what and when can I put this solution into practice

Step 6: implement the plan and review

(Creswell et al., 2019)

Action Plan – Anxiety Ladder

Also known as **Graded Exposure** (Fremont, 2003)

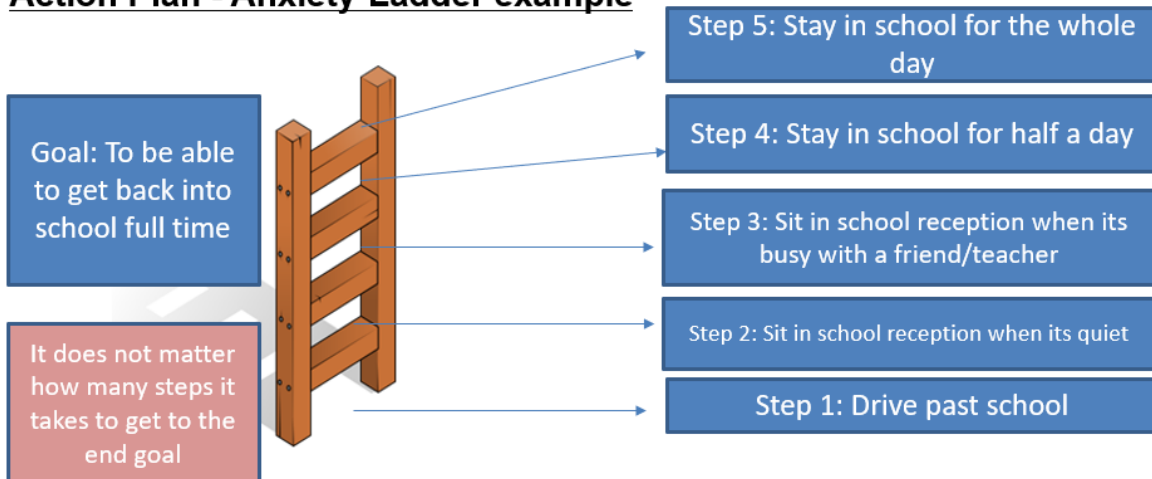
Using an anxiety ladder can make larger worries more manageable by breaking down into smaller more manageable steps

Steps should be realistic, pre-planned and ranked from least anxiety provoking to most anxiety provoking

Every step on the ladder is a milestone towards reaching their goal and should be celebrated i.e., praise or reward



Action Plan - Anxiety Ladder example



Relaxation – Breathing exercises

Help reduce symptoms of anxiety

Regulates the heart rate



Reduces hyperventilation

Reminds us that we are safe

Examples of breathing techniques

- Hand Breathing
- Star Breathing
- Candle Breathing
- Bubble Breathing

(YoungMinds, 2020)

YouTube Videos:

Hand Breathing: www.youtube.com/watch?v=4BmcV--lpNY

Candle Breathing: www.youtube.com/watch?v=n-4oQEfVSeU

Bubble/box Breathing: www.youtube.com/watch?v=9tOJZQhO_Uw

Relaxation – Progressive Muscle Relaxation

Helps reduce stress

Alter tension and relaxation in all of the body's major muscle groups

Provides a greater sense of control of the body's anxiety response

Promotes a healthier sleep routine

(VeryWellMind, 2021)

YouTube videos:

Progressive Muscle Relaxation (Longer): www.youtube.com/watch?v=ihO02wUzgkc

Progressive Muscle Relaxation (Shorter): www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q_diV-ugV9w

Relaxation – Visualization/ Grounding technique

Allow you to visualize a place that makes you feel safe



Allows for your senses to be taken into account

Allows you to be able to distract from your thoughts.

Recognize the senses around you. Help you to identify what you can:

- See
- Touch
- Hear
- Smell
- Taste

YouTube video

54321 Grounding Technique: www.youtube.com/watch?v=30VMIEmA114

Distraction

Helps the reduction of any anxious thoughts

Helps the reduction of anxious symptoms

Reminds us that we are safe.

(Getselfhelp, 2021)

Examples of distraction:

- Reading
- Listening to music
- Going out for walk
- Engaging in a hobby
- Colouring
- Talking to family or friends

Collaborative approach

For a plan to be successful, it is always better to involve the young person in the planning process and any other relevant agencies.

For example;

- Education
- Early Help
- RISE services



Communication with school

Communicate with the class teacher

- Have they noticed any changes in their behaviour?
- Tackling the problem early can be helpful as the longer they are out of the environment the harder it is to get back into school.

Keep in regular communication with key staff at school

- Work with them to make changes

Ask school whether a reduced timetable can be put in place

- Aims to build the young person back up when it feels more manageable

Request a home visit from school

- Teachers (if school has the facility to) check in with the young person and discuss possible strategies going forward

(YoungMinds, 2022)

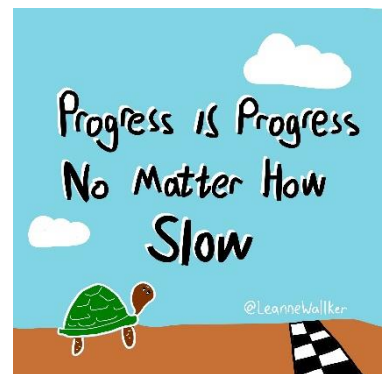
Expectations

Increased exposure to school with result in increased attendance

But it may lead to increased anxiety in the short term as your child or young person faces their fears

By supporting them to better manage their anxiety and worries, their school refusal behaviours will eventually reduce.

REMEMBER: Be patient!! Things cannot change overnight but the right strategies and support things can change.



Support for your children and young people

Everyone who makes regular contact with your child has an important role in their lives.

Support network:

- General Practitioner (GP)
- School Teachers
- Sports coaches



- School Nurse
- Youth worker
- Friends
- Family



Dimensions Tool



<https://dimensions.covwarkpt.nhs.uk/Quiz.aspx>

www.cwrise.com

Twitter & Instagram: @CWRise

Facebook: Rise – Coventry & Warwickshire

Navigation Hub - 0300 200 2021

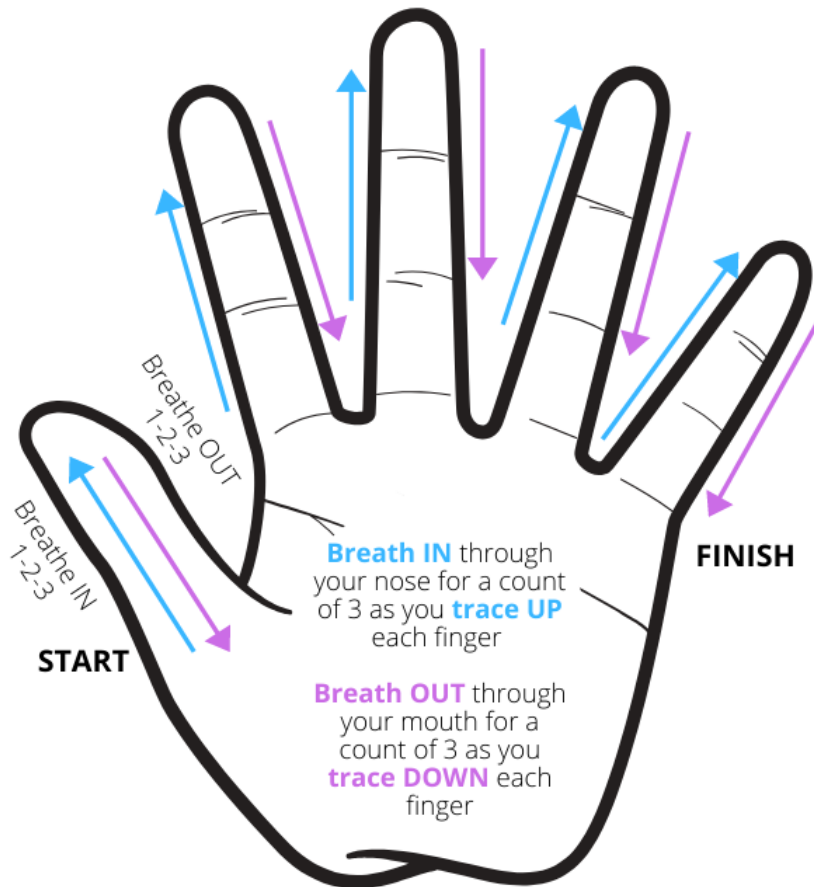
Monday to Friday 8.00am to 6.00pm

In an emergency – A&E or 999

Relaxation – hand breathing



Focusing on our breath is important for calming our minds and bodies. Try tracing each finger on the hand below with your finger as you breathe in with your nose and out with your mouth. Do you feel more relaxed? Try using Hand Breathing with your own hand before a big test or when you're feeling anxious!





Relaxation – Star breathing



Recovery & Wellbeing

ACADEMY

Star Breathing

Start at any "Breathe in" side, hold your breath at the point, then breathe out.
Keep going until you've gone around the whole star.





Relaxation – Square breathing



Recovery & Wellbeing

ACADEMY



Inhale ...2 ...3 ...4



Hold ...2 ...3 ...4

Rest ...2 ...3 ...4

Breathe.



Exhale ...2 ...3 ...4



54321 Grounding Exercise



GROUNDING WITH YOUR FIVE SENSES

what you

5

THINGS YOU CAN SEE



SUN
PICTURE ON THE WALL
PEOPLE WALKING

4

THINGS YOU CAN FEEL



WIND BLOWING
FEET ON THE FLOOR
PENCIL IN HAND

3

THINGS YOU CAN HEAR



BIRDS CHIRPING
LOOK TALKING
CAR HORNS

2

THINGS YOU CAN SMELL



FOOD FROM THE CAFETERIA
LAUNDRY DRYING IN CLOSET
FRESH CUT GRASS

1

THING YOU CAN TASTE



MINT
Breakfast
TOOTHPASTE

